

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	4		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Philippians 4:6-9		
Date:	April 2, 2017 a.m.		

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?

“Our walk,” said John R. W. Stott, “depends on our mind, our conduct and on our outlook. As a man ‘thinketh in his heart (or mind) so is he’ (Prov. 23:6, AV) and so he behaves. It is our thoughts, ultimately, which govern our behavior . . . It is a question of our preoccupation, the ambitions which compel us and interests which engross us; how we spend our time, money and energy: what we give ourselves up to. This is what we set our minds on.”¹ Failure to do so will result in the sin of forgetfulness of God’s character and acts. It was the fear of this that prompted the Psalmist to pray, “Give me understanding, and I shall live” (Psalm 119:144). Five times between verses 144 and 159, the theme of life is accented. The Hebrew word translated life is CHAYAH. It means not merely staying alive, but enjoying a rich and meaningful life, one that is strong and full of vitality.² This thought is echoed in the words of Jesus: “I have come that they might have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). What is the link between this kind of life and understanding? “The understanding,” wrote Thomas Manton, “is the great wheel of the soul, and guide of the whole man.”³ It is true that the rest of our faculties follow the dictates and decisions of the understanding. The quality of our life is dependent then on how we think. How do we naturally think?⁴ The Bible describes the *natural* condition of the human mind with terms like: *foolish* (Titus 3:3); *ignorant* (1 Peter 1:14); *futile* (Eph. 4:17); *depraved* (Romans 1:28); and likened to *darkness*⁵ (Acts 26:18; Romans 1:21; Eph. 4:18; Col. 1:13). This language is used to describe how men think in reference to the true God and spiritual realities. It is not simply a question of intelligence, for we recognize that fallen man can use his mind to accomplish anything. John Owen observed: “Be men otherwise and in other things never so wise, knowing, learned, and skillful, in spiritual things they are dark, blind, ignorant, unless they are renewed in the spirit of their minds by the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Psalm 10:4 says of the wicked, “in all his thoughts there is not room for God.” Who are these wicked people? The wicked are unbelievers, which is what we all once were. Wickedness is indeed a harsh word. We tend to think that word is reserved for a special class of people, like Hitler or Stalin. If that is the way you think, then perhaps you have never considered how great is the weight of sin.⁷ John Howe captured the essence of the matter when he wrote, “a wicked man’s life is nothing else but a continual forsaking of God, of departing from Him.”⁸ Having been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13; 1 Peter 2:9; Eph. 5:8), we are called upon to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23).

The word Paul uses for *think* in our text is *logizomai*. It is used 40 times in the New Testament. “Thirty-four of these are in Paul, who is especially fond of it in Romans and Corinthians. This is thinking in the sense of ‘reckoning it out,’ ‘calculating,’ getting all the implications clear. It implies putting it all down in the accounts so that they balance; not paying out something here, something there, without being sure how it has been spent. It is used in the papyri by a careful man who had a

camel foal which grew up, and so he had to change it over and 'reckon' it among the full-grown camels, to make his lists tally.

"That is the kind of Christian accuracy which we need in our thinking. We are not to leave things all jumbled up and unsorted out; we are to have them straight, so that we know where we are. 'Reckonest thou this, O man,' says Paul in Romans 2:3: '*Work it out*, you critical man. Do you really calculate that you are likely to be free from condemnation yourself?' Paul himself always calculates carefully: 'I have *worked it out* that our present sufferings are a mere trifle compared with the glory which Christ has in store for us' (Romans 8:18). 'Looking carefully at my past life, I cannot *soberly calculate* that I have any achievements to boast of' (Phil. 3:13). In Heb. 11:19 you find Abraham, faced with the greatest test of his life, quietly reckoning up that he can trust God. And Peter, at the end of his first letter (5:12), is glad to 'account' Silvanus as faithful, sure that he has expressed Peter's mind truly in the Greek which Peter does not feel quite competent to use himself.

"But the surprising thing about this word for careful calculation is how often it is used in connection with *Faith*, the one sphere where we should expect to be out of the realm of debit and credit. One-third of Paul's uses come in Romans 4, in connection with the faith of Abraham: 'Abraham believed in God, and it was *reckoned* to him for righteousness' (4:3). God does reckon – more carefully than we ever can – but not on the plus and minus basis that is usually the height of our achievement. He calculates, not on the pros and cons of man's character and actions, but first and chiefly on man's trust in Him. If that is there, we need not try to add up the sum of good deeds required for salvation. The one all-inclusive reckoning is made. Good works will spring out of faith. They must. If they do not, any claim to faith is hood-winking oneself. But faith alone 'counts' – and that means '*Nothing* in my hand I bring.' Not even faith saves us – only grace. But when faith is there, the way is open for God to do that reckoning which brings us home to Him.

"And if good deeds do not go into the reckoning, neither (thank God) do bad ones: 'Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not reckon against him' (Romans 4:8). God wants us too to be like that: 'Love does not put evil into the account book' (1 Cor. 13:5). Most church quarrels would disappear if people really accepted that. Let us have all our thinking far more clearly reckoned out than we usually have – and let us never forget that God's calculations are so often the other way up from ours, and be ready always to calculate things His way.

"Rom. 11:20; 12:3; 16; 1 Tim. 6:17 speak in different ways of being 'high-minded' – going round with too big an opinion of yourself, letting your thoughts of yourself get up on to the level where only God should be. Phil. 3:19, on the other hand, gives the other extreme: letting your thought-life get down in the dirt – 'whose god is the belly, whose glory is in their shame, who *mind* earthly things.' And in 1 Cor. 13:11, Paul talks of another danger to thought-life: the continuation by the adult of the immature thinking of the child.

"By contrast with all these, he writes of the thought-life that the true Christian ought to have. Five times over (Rom. 12:16; 15:5; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2; 4:2) he exhorts churches or individuals to 'be of the same mind,' to let their thinking harmonize with that of their fellow-Christians. This does not mean regimented uniformity. It does mean putting aside merely individual thinking and being determined to reach a truly common mind.

"Paul writes too of the mind that instinctively thinks of others because it loves. He has it himself: 'It is right of me to be thus minded on behalf of you all, because I have you in my heart' (Phil. 1:7). He is grateful for it in others: 'I rejoice in the Lord greatly, that now at length you have revived your thought for me' (4:10).

"And then there is the mind that thinks upwards: '*Set your mind* on the things that are above' (Col. 3:2). Contrast that with the mind that is satisfied with a high opinion of its owner.

“Centrally the Christian mind is the mind of Christ: ‘Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 2:5). Whatever the exact exposition of this verse, its meaning is clear from the context: the disposition of Christ is a disposition that is utterly self-emptying in order that others may be saved. This was what Peter could not grasp when he rebuked the Lord for talking about His death. So Jesus had to tell him: ‘Thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men’ (Mk. 8:33). ‘Your way of thinking is not God’s but man’s’ (Kingsley Williams). Peter’s mental attitudes could not adjust themselves to the idea of Christ deliberately throwing himself away. If he thought that way about his Master, he would think the same way about himself – as most of us do. That meant that Jesus had to go on and say ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself.’”⁹

CONCLUSION: Some of you will remember the TV commercial from a few years back that had as its theme encouraging minorities to pursue a college education the expression, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” Esther Meek has written a very helpful book on the whole concept of the Philosophy of Knowledge, in particular why Christians *must* be first and foremost thinking people. “Affirming the claims of Christianity has always involved people in thinking about why those claims are not *wrong*. This is how things were when I was a child. Later, affirming Christianity involved people in defending why those claims were not *meaningless*. I felt this in my late teens and early twenties, as I encountered philosophies that argued that only sense perception-based scientific claims were meaningful, and the rest – religious, psychological, ethical, artistic, and historical – were more like gibberish. But in the postmodern era, affirming Christian claims as true involves people in defending, often in the face of tremendous wrath, why those claims are not *morally outrageous*. A claim that something is universally true is something akin to Hitler’s concentration camps, a huge and damaging imposition on others’ freedom. People considering Christianity, then, simply cannot avoid the more foundational questions concerning truth. To these people, I very much want this book to bring direction and hope.”¹⁰

The Christian faith for many today is treated like it consists of simply steps to having a happy and fulfilling life. Emphasis is placed on how practical the Christian life is and how it helps people solve personal problems. The late Harry Blamires, who was a student under C. S. Lewis, wrote: “There is no subtler perversion of the Christian Faith than to treat it as a mere means to a worldly end, however admirable that end in itself may be. The Christian Faith is important because it is true. What it happens to achieve, in ourselves or in others, is another and, strictly speaking, secondary matter. For the Christian Faith will remain true whether we who profess it turn into heroic saints or into even more miserable sinners. We must insist that we worship God because he is God, not because we want something out of him. What a mean blasphemy it would be, to go through magnificent acts of public worship always with the dominant intention at the back of the mind – ‘This is really going to make a better chap of me!’ What arrogance and presumption, to treat eternal God, throned in glory, as a visual aid to moral self-improvement.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹J. R. W. Stott, *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 5-8* (Baker, 1984) p. 86.

²*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament IV*, G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds. (Eerdmans, 1980) p. 334.

³*The Complete Works of Thomas Manton III* (rpt. Maranatha, N.D.).

⁴“The thoughts do most distinguish men’s hearts, because they are the freest acts of the mind, wherein the mind is most itself,” *Work of Thomas Goodwin VI* (rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 476. C. H. Spurgeon warns, “Where there is much traffic of bad thinking, there will be much mire and dirt; every wave of wicked thought adds something to the corruption which rots upon the shore of life. It is dreadful to think that a vile imagination, once indulged, gets the keys of our minds, and can get in again very easily whether we will or no, and can so return as to bring seven other spirits with it more wicked than itself; and what may follow, no one knows.” *John Ploughman’s Talks* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) p. 52.

⁵“Spiritual darkness is spoken of in Scripture, not as a mere passive or negative thing, but as a *positive power*.” James Buchanan, *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966) p. 56.

⁶*The Works of John Owen III* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972) p. 244.

⁷This is actually the response Anselm gave to the question: “Why could God not simply wipe out man’s sin without requiring atonement?” His actual words were ‘Nondum considerasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum.’ *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man), Book 1, Chapter 21.

⁸*The Works of the Reverend John Howe I* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1990) p. 422.

⁹H. K. Moulton, *The Challenge of the Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied in Depth* (Samuel Bagster & Sons LTD) p. 161-162.

¹⁰E. L. Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Brazos Press 2003) p. 8.

¹¹Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Servant Publications, 1978) p. 510.